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Preparing for Pandemic flu and Avian flu

(Juneau, Alaska) — From time to time communities have been devastated by natural disasters, and many say that the devastation was due to a lack of preparedness. In the aftermath of disasters like earthquakes and hurricanes, Americans might ask, “Why wasn’t our community prepared?” But how does a community prepare for a flu pandemic?

State and local government are working together to ensure the Northwest Arctic Borough is prepared to handle a potential public health emergency. At the request of the Borough, a workshop and town hall meeting took place in Kotzebue Nov. 28, 29, and 30 to discuss how prepared Alaska and the region would be in the event of an influenza pandemic and to learn more about avian (bird) influenza. The Alaska Department of Health and Social Services, the Department of Fish and Game, Alaska State Troopers, the Department of Environmental Conservation, the Department of Homeland Security and Emergency Management and the Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium, were among the agencies who participated.

“In communities such as Kotzebue and the surrounding villages, where residents lead a subsistence lifestyle, learning more about avian influenza is especially important,” said Dr. Jay Butler, Public Health Deputy Director. “Informing fellow Alaskans about pandemic influenza is necessary as well. Preparedness is key to saving human lives in a public health emergency.”

At the workshop, business leaders, local officials, and residents were educated about the difference between avian flu and pandemic influenza, and were given the tools to prepare for any outbreak.

Flu viruses take several forms and can infect birds, animals, and/or humans. Pandemic influenza is a global disease outbreak, and occurs when a new flu virus for which we have no defense infects our human population. It takes several months after the outbreak of a new influenza virus before a vaccine can be developed. Pandemic influenza viruses have most recently occurred across the globe in 1918, 1957 and 1968. No one knows in advance when a pandemic may strike or how sick a particular new virus may make people.

According to Matt Robus, Director of the Division of Wildlife Conservation at the Alaska Department of Fish and Game, no cases of the current H5N1 avian flu virus that has been active in Asia, Europe and Africa have been reported in North America. However, even if this avian flu

strain is detected in Alaska's bird population, human life will not necessarily be at risk. The current H5N1 virus is extraordinarily difficult for humans to catch in its present form, so if it does appear in Alaska someday, the virus should not be a problem if simple precautions are taken. The public Town Hall Meeting provided information to residents on how to safely handle birds in order to prevent transmission of diseases and parasites to people.

However, avian flu or some other virus may eventually change into a form that easily passes between humans. If that happens, scientists and public health experts agree that we cannot stop an influenza pandemic from spreading across the world. However, a well-informed public and effective response plan will limit disease and death through early detection and preventative action. Workshops and Town Hall Meetings, such as the one held in Kotzebue, help inform Alaskans about what local and state officials are doing to prepare for this possible emergency, and what tools are available for individuals, families, and business to prepare. To learn more about avian influenza and pandemic influenza, visit the state Web site:

www.pandemicflu.alaska.gov .